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Life in the Spirit #5

Sermon Summary #5

Spiritual Medicine for what Ails the Body 1 Corinthians 12:14-31

I don't think I would have enjoyed living during the time of the Old Testament, that era of redemptive history before the coming of Jesus Christ. I don't think I would have enjoyed having to bring a blood sacrifice year after year after year, knowing that the offering up of bulls and goats could never truly and finally take away the guilt of my sin. I don't think I would have enjoyed the long list of detailed and often bizarre regulations and laws that governed the lives of the people of Israel. I don't think I would have enjoyed not getting to eat bacon for breakfast.

But most of all, I don't think I would have liked the fact that only certain selected people were recipients of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps you were not aware of the fact that under the Old Covenant of Moses, only prophets and priests and kings and certain individuals who were assigned special tasks actually experienced on a regular basis the power of the Holy Spirit. And even then, you could sin or fail in your God-given task and the Spirit would be taken from you. I don't think I would have enjoyed living under those conditions.

One of the things that makes living now, under the New Covenant, so wonderful, is what I call the "democratizing" of the Holy Spirit. What I mean by that fancy word is that all of God's people, everyone who knows Jesus as Savior by faith alone is permanently indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is what the Apostle Peter described in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Listen again to his famous words as he quotes from the OT prophet Joel:

"And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on **ALL** flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).

This is what I meant by the word "democratizing" – all flesh, everyone who knows God, receives the Spirit. Whether you are male or female, young or old, free or slave, if you know God through faith in Jesus you receive permanently the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

This is what Paul also has in mind in 1 Corinthians 12:7, a passage we looked at several weeks ago. There he says that "to each [which means, to ALL] is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Think about what that means. It means that, by God's good and wise design, every one of you here today who knows Jesus as Lord and Savior has been uniquely, individually, and specially blessed with the presence of the Spirit to minister to everyone else. You are equipped by God to manifest the presence of his Spirit so that others can become more like Jesus.

Whereas in the OT only specially selected individuals were so gifted, in the NT all Christians are so gifted. No one is left out. No one is unqualified or disqualified. It doesn't matter if you think or feel like you've been left out. You haven't. If you know Jesus, you are gifted by the power of the Spirit to serve and contribute and minister to everyone else in this local church.

However, we don't always do what God has called and equipped us to do. Let me explain. All through 1 Corinthians 12-14, and elsewhere in Scripture, the church is described as if it were a body. In fact, we are Christ's body on earth. He is the head and we are individually members of his body. But just as our physical bodies sometimes suffer from disease or certain ailments or injuries, so also the body of Christ, the local church, can suffer and fail to live as it should. Although we are all indwelt by the Spirit, gifted and empowered by the Spirit, we don't always understand this truth; we don't always embrace it and express it as we should. Here in 1 Cor. 12:14-31, Paul tells us why.

The two most common spiritual afflictions in the body of Christ are actually polar opposites of one another.

On the one hand, at one end of the spectrum, are feelings of uselessness and ineffectiveness. I'm talking about those in the local church who think of themselves as expendable. They don't matter. They contribute little if anything of value. They are unqualified and unproductive. These are people who are convinced that if they were to disappear, no one would notice and everything would continue to function just the way it always has. They are convinced they are unnecessary. The body has no need of them. They are like the appendix or the tonsils or the wisdom teeth. Cutting them out of the body altogether may even be a good thing for the church.

On the other hand, at the altogether other end of the spectrum, are those who experience feelings of self-sufficiency and superiority. They alone matter. They alone are important. They alone are necessary and essential. And if others aren't just like them, then the others simply don't matter and aren't needed. These are the members of the body who take pride in their gifts and skills as if they are themselves personally responsible for their effectiveness. If the first group thinks of themselves as the appendix or tonsils or wisdom teeth in the body of Christ, these folks see themselves as the brains and the heart and eyes and arms.

And when Christians in a church start thinking in these terms, the body gets real sick real fast. When some feel useless and say, "You don't need me," and others feel self-sufficient and say, "I don't need you," the body suffers, which is to say, the church suffers.

So let's look at each of these spiritual afflictions or diseases and see what remedy Paul proposes.

First, he describes those who have feelings of uselessness and ineffectiveness in vv. 14-16.

What's Paul saying? I think what he means is that there are some in the local church who believe that if they aren't like someone else, they are of no benefit or use. They look at who they are and how they have been gifted, then turn to look at how God has gifted others, and then conclude: "Because I'm not like him, I'm useless. Because I'm not like her, I'm of no benefit to anyone."

Again, think of the local church as if it were a body. In that body, those with "foot" gifts or "ear" gifts or "knee cap" gifts look at those with "hand" gifts and "eye" gifts and say, "I'm not like that. I don't have those gifts and talents and skills. I can't function in the church like the others do. I can't do what the "hands" and "eyes" do, so I guess I'm not of any benefit to anyone at all. I might as well not be a part of the body at all. Go ahead and amputate me!"

So what's the medicine Paul prescribes to heal the body of this sort of spiritual disease? What does he recommend?

(1) The first thing he does is to challenge head on the beliefs of those who are convinced they are useless and serve no good or beneficial function in the body, in the church. Look at v. 17.

His point is that if God had made everyone the same, the body might qualify to appear in a carnival freak show, but it wouldn't function very well. You who have "ear" gifts, if God had given you "eye" gifts, how would the body hear anything? You might have 20-20 or x-ray vision, but you'd be deaf! Or again, you who have "nose" gifts, if God had given you "ear" gifts, how would the body smell anything?

Skip down to vv. 19-20. Paul's point is that if everyone in the body were the same, there would be no body. There'd just be one huge eye or one massive hand. So, as he says at the end of both v. 15 and v. 16, just because you aren't like everyone else in this church doesn't make you any less a part of the body or any less essential or useful.

Just because you compare yourself with others and don't like what you see or become envious of what they are or resentful of what you are, that doesn't make you any less a vital and important part of the body of Christ.

In the same way that the foot or ear or nose contributes to the health of the physical body, so likewise each of you, regardless of where you fit in or what role you play or how you minister, your presence is absolutely essential to the body of Christ.

Paul's point, then, is that if you got your way there wouldn't even be a body! For there to be a body there must be a diversity of members, each with its own place and part and role to play. That's what he has in mind in vv. 14, 19-20.

(2) Paul's second response to those of you who feel useless in the church is to say that your way of thinking is a denial of and a rebellion against the wisdom and goodness of God himself. I know that sounds harsh, and someone might say, "Sam, you shouldn't say things like that to people who feel useless, because it will only add to their misery. Now, in addition to feeling useless, they also feel guilty!"

Or think of it this way. The person who feels useless might say, "Hey, I never said I wanted the whole body to be an eye or an ear. I realize a properly functioning body needs ears and a nose and hands and feet and knee-caps and knuckles and the like. I'm not questioning that. I'm just saying that I don't like being what *I* am. I want to be something different. I want to be like someone else."

To which Paul responds in v. 18 by saying, "But as it is, **God** arranged the members in the body, each one of them, **as he chose.**"

Paul isn't being insensitive. He's not trying to add guilt to feelings of uselessness. He's simply pointing out that you and I need to trust God when it comes to who we are and how we function in the body of Christ. We need to trust his wisdom and his goodness and rest calmly and confidently that what he has done is for our best interests individually and for the church's best interests corporately.

When you say, "I'm useless, I'm of no help to anyone, the church would probably be better off without me even being here," you aren't defying other members of the body. You are defying God. You are challenging his goodness and greatness and wisdom in setting the body in place as he has chosen to do.

Look again back at vv. 4-6 . . . Whatever gifts there are, and whoever has which, it was God "who empowers them all in everyone" (v. 6b).

By the way, v. 18 brings up the same problem that we earlier encountered in v. 11. In v. 11 Paul said that the Spirit "apportions to each one individually **as he wills.**" In other words, whatever gifts we end up receiving, whatever ministries or expressions of service in the church in which we succeed and do well, this was God's doing, not ours. It was his decision, not ours.

The same point is now being made in slightly different terms here in v. 18.

But if both v. 11 and v. 18 are saying that God, through the Spirit, chooses or wills who gets what when it comes to spiritual gifts, why would we ever pray or ask God for other gifts?

Let me put it in slightly different terms, using Paul's own words to do so. In 1 Corinthians 14:1 Paul says, "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." Later on, in 14:13, he says, "Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. Then again in v. 39 Paul says, "earnestly desire to prophesy."

But if God is the one who wills or chooses which gifts we are to have, why are we to pray for, seek after, or pursue them?

I'll have a lot more to say about those exhortations in chapter 14 in a couple of weeks, but for now two comments are enough.

First, just because you may want additional gifts beyond the gift or gifts you already have does not necessarily mean you are ungrateful for what you've got or that the gift you now have is useless. I'm very happy and grateful for all that God has done in my life up until now, but that doesn't mean I don't want him to do more. It doesn't mean I'm neglecting or forgetting about all he's already done.

Second, God implements his will by changing ours. Or again, one of the ways that accomplishes what he desires is by awakening in us a desire for the same thing. If God chooses or wills to impart the gift of mercy to you, he likely will work in your heart to want it. If God chooses or wills to bestow a teaching gift in you or the gift of prophecy or

leadership, he will probably stir your heart to feel the need for it and produce in you a longing for those particular gifts. Your desire for a particular gift is thus the means by which God goes about fulfilling his own will in your life.

So let me say this to those of you who may not have gifts that will bring you into the limelight or place you on a platform or put a microphone in your hand. I have in mind those with the gift of service or mercy or encouragement or giving. People may not see you, but God does. You may not feel helpful, but you are indispensable. You may not be acknowledged or praised, but your value to the body is immeasurable, and God will reward you in the age to come.

Now remember, I said there are *two potential diseases or afflictions or injuries in the body of Christ* that threaten it. The first was a feeling of uselessness. We now come to the second.

Second, Paul also describes people at the other end of the spectrum with an entirely different disease. It isn't that they feel useless. Far from it. They feel utterly superior and self-sufficient. If some say, "You don't need me; I'm useless," the others say, "I don't need you; I can do it on my own." That's the problem that Paul focuses on in vv. 21-26.

So, if the problem in vv. 14-20 was self-pity, the problem in vv. 21-26 is self-sufficiency. Some people in the church feel dispensable, while others are elitist.

Let's read vv. 21-26 once again.

Paul's language here is difficult to unpack. Although I can't be sure, I think Paul is here referring to our internal organs. They "seem" to be less important, but only because we can't see them. They do not function out in the open. Yet all would agree that the body can't survive or function without them.

Also, the "less honorable" or "unpresentable" body parts are probably a veiled reference to one's sexual organs. They are treated with greater honor in that they are clothed or adorned for modesty's sake. Paul's point is simply that you can't draw any conclusions about whether or not a body part is important or valuable based on its external appearance, whether it be clothed or unclothed. Some body parts that might appear to be weak and unpresentable, we treat with extraordinary care. Other body parts that appear important are not given much attention.

God's aim in this is simply that there be no division in the church based on who has what gift! Let me repeat that . . .

God's aim, instead, is that all members of a local body care equally one for another. The body is a unity. Each part should care for and attend to every other part.

Paul concludes his argument in vv. 27-31 by making the forceful point that no one spiritual gift is intended for all Christians. His point is that God doesn't want everyone to be an apostle. He doesn't want all to be prophets or all to be teachers or all to speak in tongues.

Note that the questions asked in vv. 29-30 are written in such a way that a negative answer is expected. A more literal rendering would be:

"All are not apostles, are they? [No]"
"All are not prophets, are they? [No]"
Etc.

Rather, God has appointed some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be teachers, and so on. And whatever appointment or assignment you have received from God, you need to know that you are a vital part or member of the body. Don't wallow in self-pity because you don't have the gifts that someone else does. And don't exalt yourself in pride that because of the gifts you do have that you don't need others to help you grow in Christ.

In conclusion: Let's take note of the various listing of spiritual gifts throughout the NT. There is considerable overlap between several of the lists.

1 Corinthians 12:8-10

Word of Wisdom
Word of Knowledge
Faith
Gifts of Healings
Working of Miracles
Prophecy
Discerning of Spirits
Tongues
Interpretation of Tongues

1 Corinthians 12:28-30

Apostles
Prophets
Teachers
Miracles
Gifts of healings
Helping
Administrating
Tongues
Interpretation of tongues

Romans 12:6-8

Prophecy
Service
Teaching
Exhortation
Giving
Leading
Mercy

Ephesians 4:11

Apostles
Prophets
Evangelists
Pastor
Teacher (or Pastor-Teacher)

1 Peter 4:10

Speaking gifts
Serving gifts

There are approximately 20 gifts that may be identified from these lists. But we have no reason to think that these are exhaustive. What about intercession, interpretation of dreams, deliverance, etc.?

Paul closes 1 Corinthians 12 with the exhortation that we are to “earnestly desire the higher gifts.” But to do so to the neglect of love is perhaps the worst sickness that a local church can possibly experience. To that we turn in next week’s message.